
OFFICE OF THE INDEPENDENT BUDGET ANALYST REPORT

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Results of San Diego Speaks: Community Input Process

OVERVIEW

During discussion of the FY 2010 Legislative Budget Process and Calendar at the January 7, 2009 meeting of the Budget and Finance Committee, Chairman Tony Young expressed his interest for the Budget and Finance Committee to host a series of community meetings that would allow for citizen input prior to the formulation of the Mayor's proposed budget. At this meeting, the IBA and the Council members discussed various ways to effectively involve residents in the budget process, and the consensus of the Committee was that public input earlier in the budget process would increase the chances that the Mayor's proposed budget would reflect community service priorities. It was decided that a series of community meetings would be scheduled, and a citizen participation survey would be designed that could be completed in person at the community meetings, and could also be available on the City's website. This community input process is "San Diego Speaks".

This report discusses the outcome of the San Diego Speaks community meetings, reports the results of the survey process, and describes other methods used to solicit budget suggestions, and possible improvements for future input opportunities.

Survey Development

A variety of survey instruments were considered based on a review of survey tools employed by other cities and jurisdictions. Input on the survey was received by members of the public as well as members of the Budget Committee. The final survey (Attachment A) was designed to allow respondents to prioritize City services, and display preferences for specific services. It also allows individuals to indicate which services they feel could be reduced or eliminated, and ask them to note for which services they may be willing to pay more.

Budget and Finance Committee Website and Hotline

At the onset of this series of community meetings, a webpage for the Budget and Finance Committee was created on the City's website (www.sandiego.gov/budgetandfinance) to provide another avenue for the public to obtain budget information and give input. An electronic version of the survey was made available on-line on the webpage to reach a greater audience. Additional information on the status of the City's budget is also available, along with links to other sites describing various federal economic stimulus plan programs. A "San Diego Speaks" telephone hotline was also established (619-236-6934) to allow recorded messages on suggestions and recommendations on city budget priorities to be left by citizens at any time of the day or night. As of March 18, 2009, approximately forty calls had been received, with suggestions such as exploring federal economic stimulus funds, considering greater cooperation and creating efficiency between county and city government, charging for trash collection, and increasing the use of volunteers, among others.

Community Meetings

In an effort to reach out to residents throughout the City, community meetings were scheduled in five of the eight San Diego City Council Districts, hosted by the members of the Budget and Finance Committee. A total of six public budget hearings were held:

- Friday, January 30, 2009, in Council Committee Room, City Hall, Council District 2
- Wednesday, February 4, 2009, at the Joe & Vi Jacobs Center, Council District 4
- Saturday, February 14, 2009, at the Mira Mesa Library, Council District 5
- Saturday, February 21, 2009, at Hoover High School, Council District 3
- Wednesday, February 25, 2009, in Council Committee Room, City Hall, Council District 2
- Thursday, February 26, 2009, at Lewis Middle School, Council District 7

At these hearings, citizens were allowed to address the Committee with their budget priorities and suggestions for reductions. They were also provided with surveys and informed of the ability to complete a survey on-line. Following a presentation of the Mayor's staff on the status of the City's financial situation, the Committee accepted public testimony. The number of participants ranged from two speakers at the January 30 meeting to 57 speakers at the February 21 meeting. In total, over 150 speakers participated at the six community hearings.

Overall, the focus of public testimony varied. Comments made at the February 4 Council District 4 meeting reflected greatest emphasis on preserving library and recreation programs. The need for neighborhood services; community based-partnerships, especially working with small businesses and micro-lending programs; and a desire of the community to donate volunteer service were also major themes. Some specific suggestions included charging for parking at the zoo and the beach, selling the land designated for the new main library, and charging a fee for recycling.

The testimony at the February 14 hearing in Council District 5 was closely divided among those favoring to preserve the Library budget, the need for a greater focus on addressing the structural budget deficit, and reducing employee benefits and salaries.

The foremost theme at the February 21 hearing in Council District 3 was the community's priority in preserving library and park and recreation funding. A significant number of speakers stressed the importance of financial reforms, suggested increasing payments from outside agencies, exploring new options for revenue, and eliminating management layers within the City administration. Many speakers repeatedly highlighted the need to strengthen volunteerism throughout the entire City organization. Additionally, some individuals expressed the need to reduce or eliminate the street sweeping program. A suggestion was also made that the City could reduce weekly trash collection, by alternating refuse and recycling collection, while still complying with the People's Ordinance.

Public testimony at the February 26 budget hearing in District 6 primarily centered on reforming City administration, such as reducing City employee salaries and benefits, as well as the need to eliminate some positions and/or overtime. Attendees expressed the need for the City to reevaluate its redevelopment policies. Libraries were mentioned as the service of highest priority to the greatest number of speakers.

Labor Organization Suggestions

At the January 30 meeting, representatives of the City's employee labor organizations were invited to provide input and suggestions to address the budget situation. Representatives from all five of the City's labor organizations made presentations, including:

- American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (Local 127)
- International Association of Firefighters Local 145
- Municipal Employees Association (MEA)
- San Diego Police Officers Association (POA)
- Deputy City Attorneys Association of San Diego

The most detailed and specific presentation, made by Local 127, included nine recommendations with estimated savings total \$11.35 million to \$14.35 million. These suggestions covered span of control issues in several departments, raised the issue of implementing completed Business Process Re-Engineering studies (BPRs) for Collection Services and Park Maintenance, and the possibility of moving Storm Water functions into the Environmental Services Department as a cost-saving measure. Also mentioned were reductions to eliminate overlapping and redundant administrative functions, reducing management flexible and leave benefits, and the possibility of implementing a 4 day, 10-hour work week.

Business Leader Suggestions

Business leaders were invited to attend the February 25 meeting, and representatives from the Chamber of Commerce and the San Diego Chapter of the California Restaurant Association (CRA) presented priorities and recommendations to address the budget deficit. The Chamber suggested the City employ a multi-year budget process, undertake further pension reform, adopt a full cost-recovery program, and complete an inventory of under-utilized City assets. Additionally, the Chamber suggested that further efficiencies could be reached if some City services, for example libraries, would be merged with those of San Diego County. The CRA presented a status of the restaurant industry in San Diego, describing the notable impact of the recession on the city's restaurant industry. The CRA representative suggested that the City should allow for greater flexibility in issuing entertainment permits, for example allowing

temporary single-night permits. Also, it was suggested that restaurants may benefit from the City increasing the allowable ratio of patrons to security personnel.

Assistance of San Diego State University

The Social Science Research Laboratory, a research survey organization at San Diego State University (SDSU), provides comprehensive survey research and program evaluation services to university faculty, administration, students, and regional government and non-profit organizations. SDSU assisted the City of San Diego in compiling and analyzing all on-line and paper-and-pencil surveys. As noted above, SDSU did not develop the survey, but provided a report summarizing the results of both surveys. 275 paper-and-pencil surveys and 412 on-line surveys were completed, totaling 687 surveys in all.

There are several important notes on the limitations of the survey. The SDSU report states that data collected was not random, but rather provided from a “non-probability sample of voluntary participants”, therefore results cannot be inferred to represent the preferences of all San Diego residents. Some respondents left many questions blank, and the on-line and paper-and-pencil surveys slightly varied in the question format, resulting in the inability to merge certain questions. Open-ended questions provided multiple answers which were recorded and reflected individually as unique ideas.

Summary of Survey Findings as Compiled by SDSU

The SDSU report (Attachment B) is organized to summarize the findings in a number of ways. First, within the three categories of (1) Public Safety Services, (2) Parks, Beaches, Recreation, Libraries and Arts, organized within the subcategories of Libraries and Arts, Park Maintenance and Quality of Facilities and Recreation Programs and (3) Neighborhood Programs services were ranked as:

- Essential or Non-Essential
- Reduce or Eliminate (paper-and-pencil survey)
- Reduce, Eliminate or Neither (on-line survey)
- Pay More For

Second, SDSU provides an overview of survey results for “Suggested Tax/Revenue Opportunities.” Data collected indicates that increasing taxes (26%), charging for trash collection (15%) and reducing City salaries/perk (12%) were the most frequent responses.

Finally, all 38 public services identified by the City are ranked in two ways; as “Essential and Non-Essential Services” and the “Reduce/Eliminate/Neither” (on-line survey), without any constraint to the above three categories of services.

When asked to rank all 38 services as Essential or Non Essential, results showed:

Highest Essential

- 911 Emergency Response
- Overall Police Services

Highest Non-Essential

- Street Landscaping
- Art and Cultural Programs
- Adult Recreational Center Programs

When asked to indicate which services should be Reduced or Eliminated, or Reduce/Eliminate/Neither, results showed:

Most to be Reduced

- Residential Street Sweeping
- Street Landscaping
- Passive Park Areas

Most to be Eliminated

- Adult Recreational Center Programs
- Art and Cultural Programs
- Main Library Downtown

The report concludes that, as noted above, public safety services are considered most essential and in some cases, respondents are willing to pay more for them. The report underscores that increasing taxes, charging for trash collection and reducing city employees' salaries and perks remain as the most popular options for new/increased revenue.

Other Avenues to Solicit Budget Input

Additional opportunities to provide input to the City's budget process have been created. The Mayor asked City employees for their ideas, and also asked members of the public to submit suggestions.

Employee Suggestions

Last Fall, the Mayor called for City employees to submit ideas they had for addressing the City's budget challenges. Almost 400 employee suggestions were submitted for trimming department budgets or generating new revenues. City departments were provided the suggestions to evaluate and analyze them for the feasibility to implement, the potential for cost savings or revenue generation, and possible incorporation into the FY 2010 budget. Councilmembers requested and received the employee suggestions that were submitted. The IBA has also received the departmental evaluations of the suggestions and will be reviewing these in conjunction with the Mayor's Proposed Budget, when it becomes available.

Mayor's Web Page

In January, the Mayor also asked the public to provide input while his office began preparing the Fiscal Year 2010 budget. A special section on the City's website was created which allows citizens to enter their opinions on-line. Entered suggestions are posted on a regular basis, and all suggestions are planned for review by City staff.

Recommended Process Improvements and Outlook for Next Year

As noted earlier, the survey process and survey itself had some limitations. Data was not randomly collected, but provided by voluntary participants, and results should not be extrapolated to represent the preferences of all San Diego residents. Also, as the on-line and paper-and-pencil surveys contained variations in the question format, there was difficulty in merging all results. However, the information that has been collected is valuable, and the process is useful and can be improved for future iterations.

In February 2009, the Government Finance Officers Association (GFOA) issued a new recommended practice, “Public Participation in Planning, Budgeting, and Performance Budgeting” (Attachment C). GFOA notes that public participation efforts can be extremely valuable, and care needs to be taken to ensure these efforts are sincere, well-managed and timely, and that the information gathered needs to be incorporated into decision making. It also describes the importance of communication to the public regarding how the information collected will be or was used. Without these elements, public cynicism can increase, and the public may perceive their input was not taken seriously. We recommend publishing the survey results prominently on the City’s webpage to allow survey participants, citizens and all interested parties the opportunity to review all comments that were received.

The Budget and Finance Committee may wish to evaluate the effectiveness of this recently completed community input process and survey, and determine possible improvements, and partnerships with others, that can be explored and initiated for future public input opportunities.

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Attachments:

- A. San Diego Speaks Survey
- B. San Diego Speaks Survey 2009 – SDSU Report
- C. GFOA Recommended Practice: Public Participation in Planning, Budgeting, and Performance Management